

# Fort McHenry Birthplace

Story and Photos by SSG Alberto Betancourt



**S**AILBOATS glide lazily over the tranquil waters of Baltimore Harbor. And on a nearby hillside is a star-shaped brick fort, above which a huge 18th-century American flag proudly flies.

Fort McHenry is the birthplace of the American national anthem. The valiant defense of the fort and the harbor by American forces during the War of 1812 inspired Francis Scott Key to write “The Star Spangled Banner.”

“The site is full of history,” said Paul Plamann, a park ranger who’s worked at Fort McHenry for more than 35 years. “We’re not only considered a national park, but also a national monument and historic shrine. Of America’s 385 national parks, we’re the only one with this special designation.”

“Surprisingly, most people who visit the fort don’t realize our national anthem was written during the 1800s,” Plamann said. “Most think it dates to the Revolutionary War or even the Civil War.”

It was, in fact, a battle that took place Sept. 13 and 14, 1814, and the flag flying over the fort at that time, that inspired the young poet-lawyer to pen his famous words.

“Key didn’t know at the time that he was writing his country’s national anthem,” Plamann said. “In fact, he never knew. He died before the words became the anthem.”

Today silent cannons guard the fort’s exterior walls, and living-history volunteers are re-enactors and tour guides for the more than 600,000 people who visit the 43-acre park each year.

Wearing an 18th-century uniform, Wayne Cofiell stands at attention in front of one of the barracks inside the fort.

Cofiell has been a living-history volun-

**A replica of the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key flies over Fort McHenry. The original flag is being restored at the Smithsonian Institution.**

# the American National Anthem

teen for more than three years. The University of Baltimore history major and local firefighter said he volunteers as part of a school research project, and also because of his family's historical connection to the war.

"A cousin on my mother's side was in the Maryland militia and fought the British," he said.

Cofiell said Americans have to understand the country's past in order to understand its present.

"We represent soldiers of the past, and by doing that show respect for soldiers of today," he said.

Both Plamann and Cofiell encourage soldiers everywhere to visit the fort or any national park associated with an historic battlefield.

"You can read about them, see them on TV, but when you visit one of the historic sites it leaves a lasting impression," said Plamann. "It allows you to visualize events that took place hundreds of years ago and helps you understand how those events continue to shape our lives." □



Re-enactors sit inside the enlisted men's barracks while a colleague talks with visitors.



Fort McHenry living history volunteer Nicholas Ross demonstrates the loading of one of the fort's large cannons.

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Living history volunteers such as Monty Phair (left) and Nicholas Ross give visitors a glimpse of how life once was at the fort.

